

Personal

OFFERINGS FROM JOHN TYLER WINES COMBINE HISTORY AND PASSION

by Daedalus Howell / photos by Ryan Lely

The first thing that you have to realize when it comes to John Tyler Wines is that there is no “John Tyler” as such. Instead, “John Tyler” is the blended moniker of vineyard owner John Bacigalupi and winemaker Tyler Heck, who have in common a family history steeped in the history of winemaking in California.

Over half a century ago, Tyler’s grandfather Paul and his brother Adolf had purchased Korbel Champagne Cellars in Guerneville. Shortly thereafter, Charles Bacigalupi, John’s father, purchased 121 acres in the Russian River Valley. The two men were friends and envisioned a coming demand for premium wine grapes, Paul encouraged Charles to plant Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (the latter was the source of Chateau Montelena’s historic win in the 1976 “Judgment of Paris” tasting).

The vineyards have grown by an additional 50 acres and now boast Zinfandel and Petite Sirah as well. The winery’s *métier*, however, remains the small-production Zinfandels and Pinot Noirs that win awards and hearts alike. His personal provenance in the wine industry notwithstanding, it’s Heck’s talent and taste that have him poised to help shape the future of winemaking in California.

“Gotta use what you got,” says the fourth-generation winemaker, who towers over the average man and boasts a beard that recalls either the hirsute rockers ZZ Top or perhaps Rasputin. “I wasn’t smart enough to be an astronaut.”

It takes only about 60 seconds to realize that Heck’s appraisal of his own intelligence reflects more his grounded and humble disposition than his estimable intellect and knowledge of winemaking—assessments he would likely deny. What he can’t deny, however, is the fact that wine has been his sustaining passion.

“One thing I didn’t really put together until after my father passed away is the importance of how that fits into somebody’s life,” reflects Heck. “I think in anybody’s life you’re just trying to find a craft, find a way to practice that craft and hopefully get better at it is you go along and earn a living. Then, most importantly, leave something behind when you’re gone. What better way to do that than with wine? It brings people together and even now, when I open up a bottle of wine that my father

made, people tell good stories about him.”

Creating wines that can age and endure has become one of Heck’s touchstones with John Tyler and is as much as tribute to the efforts of the Bacigalupis as to his own father.

“I understand that most people drink their wine through a straw on the way home from the grocery store,” he jokes. “But I just think when you reach a certain price point, not only should things show well out of the gate, but they should offer a certain amount of ageability.”

He adds, “I enjoy making wines that remind me of the way I think they should be—the ones I grew up tasting.” Part of that, according to Heck, entails bringing back the “classic Burgundy mold” to varietals like Pinot Noir. “I just find it somewhat ironic that nowadays in the wine industry taking a traditional approach is ‘going against the grain,’” says Heck, “Most winemakers these days come from Boston or New York and go to Davis, so I understand there’s a different frame of reference in terms of ‘California style,’” opines Heck, who studied at both California State University, Fresno and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Heck’s formal education was built upon the knowledge his father imparted to him, supplemented by gigs at wineries ranging from bulk-scale corporate facilities to small-scale, family-owned boutique operations as far-flung as Australia.

The Bacigalupis’ first plantings of Pinot Noir were in 1964, and 42 years later the fruit continues to shine, as it does in Heck’s 2006 vintage, the peak of a mini-vertical that reaches back to 2003. The bouquet is filled with a hint of valley floor, followed by notes of vibrant strawberries and rosemary and underscored by an earthy minerality. Likewise, the well-structured 2006 Zinfandel balances herbal notes with spice and bright hues of cherry.

“It’s just a different style. I understand most people nowadays are making wine for the market, but, you know, at the end of the day if your name’s going on the bottle you have to be truly yourself and do what you believe.”

johntylerwines.com ■■

Best



Winemaker Tyler Heck
of John Tyler Wines.
Below: John Tyler
Pinot Noir.

